

THURSDAY, MAY 9, 1889.

THE ESTATE OF HER MAJESTY'S
COMMISSIONERS OF 1851.

UNDER this heading the *Times* has announced that "a Sub-Committee of the Commissioners, amongst the members of which are Lord Thring, Sir Lyon Playfair, Mr. Childers, M.P., and Mr. Mundella, M.P., held a meeting on Saturday last to adopt a final report upon the disposal of this Estate which should be submitted for the approval of the Royal Commissioners themselves." The Commissioners have determined to let out a considerable part of their Estate to house builders, and the Sub-Committee had before them, on Saturday last, tenders for building leases. If the Commissioners accept these tenders, they will add some £10,000 a year to their income. This notion of sacrificing the Estate to builders of private houses has been known for some months; and, with the view of demonstrating against so short-sighted, not to say utterly immoral, a policy, a Memorial has been framed and circulated. We have received a copy of it, and, entirely acquiescing in its object, we print it *in extenso*. It runs as follows:—

To His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, K.G., &c.,
&c., President of Her Majesty's Commissioners for the
Exhibition of 1851.

The Memorial from the undersigned [Here fill in name of
Chamber of Commerce,
Corporation, Guild or
Educational Institution.]
on behalf of _____

SHEWETH

(1) That in the year 1851 a large surplus profit accrued after the conclusion of the Exhibition of 1851.

(2) That this surplus profit was for the most part expended by Her Majesty's Commissioners for the Exhibition of 1851 in the purchase of a considerable Estate of land at Kensington, for the erection of public institutions, and generally to benefit the country's Arts, Sciences, Manufactures, and Commerce.

(3) That various public institutions, such as the South Kensington Museum, the Training School of Science and Art, the Natural History Museum, the Royal College of Music, the Royal Albert Hall, and the Imperial Institute, have been or are in course of being built upon this Estate.

(4) That fine open spaces intervene between the various institutions, to provide for further extensions of them, and give them proper light and air.

(5) That Sir Lyon Playfair, M.P., as Secretary to Her Majesty's Commissioners, recently stated in the House of Commons that a large portion of these fine open spaces between the public institutions already named was to be leased for the erection of private houses and mansions.

(6) That, in the opinion of Your Royal Highness's Memorialists, this crowding upon the public institutions of private houses and mansions is adverse to the interests of Arts, Sciences, Manufactures, and Commerce, and foreign to the intentions of Her Majesty's Commissioners, publicly announced, when they purchased the land, and also subsequently.

(7) That, in the opinion of Your Royal Highness's Memorialists, this crowding upon the public institutions to benefit Arts, Sciences, Manufactures, and Commerce, of private houses and mansions is in conflict with the last public announcement in respect of the future of the Estate which H.R.H. the late Prince Consort made within six months of his lamented death.

Your Memorialists, therefore, respectfully pray that

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Your Royal Highness, as President of Her Majesty's Commissioners, will prevent the public institutions on the Estate of Her Majesty's Commissioners from being crowded upon by private houses and mansions, and will induce Her Majesty's Commissioners to preserve intact those unallotted portions of their Estate in order that they may be placed to the great public uses for which the Estate was destined by Her Majesty's Commissioners and their President, Your Royal Highness's illustrious father, the lamented Prince Consort.

The *Times*, commenting upon the effect of the Commissioners' scheme for filling up their Estate with private houses, says that "the irregular blocks of variegated private houses" will more or less overwhelm and hedge in "such National Institutions for Science and Art as the Estate may ultimately contain."

From time to time the Commissioners' various proposals for dealing with their Estate have been publicly criticized, with the useful result that such of the proposals as were in the nature of distinct departures from the original intentions set forth at the time the Estate passed into their keeping, have been modified or dropped.

Twelve years or so ago, some representatives of the original subscribers, whose aid in 1851 virtually placed a large portion of the surplus funds at the disposal of the Commissioners, urged that unallotted portions of the Estate should be sold to meet expenses in founding provincial galleries or museums for science and art. For good reasons, the Commissioners did not give way to these plausible representations. They said at that time that, under the guidance of the Prince Consort, "we purchased the estate to provide an *extensive site for the development of great institutions for the promotion of industrial art and science amongst the manufacturing population*." At this very time, and, as was stated in NATURE of May 2, p. 3, the Commissioners proposed certain conditions to the Government, under which they (the Commissioners) would raise £100,000 as a contribution towards erecting a Museum of Scientific Instruments, a Science Library, and Laboratories of Scientific Research and Instruction. This proposal, which was not entertained however by the Government of the day, contained provisions for keeping the main parts of the Estate free for the development of national institutions. The reasons for keeping the main portions of the Estate at liberty in this way have since remained every whit as strong as they were then. Indeed they are stronger than ever, in the face of Government action now being taken in respect of the "National Science Museum." But a malign influence supervened. It was but a week before Christmas last year, when Mr. G. Samuelson asked a question in the House of Commons, that Sir Lyon Playfair stated that Her Majesty's Commissioners for the Exhibition of 1851 were arranging to dispose of considerable plots of land on their Estate to house builders, in order that the Commissioners might increase their income by obtaining ground-rents from private houses, and that the Commissioners did not intend to publish their reasons for this. Is Sir Lyon Playfair's assurance in thus apparently setting public opinion at defiance to be ascribed to a sense of relief from further responsibility which he may have derived from his resignation of the secretaryship to the Commissioners?

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There is no ambiguity in his statement as to the choking up of the Kensington Estate with private houses and mansions. The sites to be occupied by private houses are bounded on the north by the Albert Hall and the adjoining semicircular arcades or quadrants, on the east and west by portions of the galleries containing the Museum of Science and the India Museum, and on the south by the Imperial Institute. They form the gardens and terraces so well known to the public who flocked to the evening *al fresco* entertainments which were given in connection with the series of International Exhibitions recently held at South Kensington. The various public announcements issued by Her Majesty's Commissioners during the last thirty-five years conclusively show that this land was acquired for more useful and comprehensive purposes than those of speculative house builders.

Let us briefly refer to those announcements. On the close of the Exhibition of 1851, H.M. Commissioners found themselves the possessors of some £200,000. They were impressed with the fact that many public institutions founded to promote science and art had been "subject to the disadvantages of being placed in such a situation from the crowding of surrounding houses that they were without light or air, and had no convenient access." They therefore determined to purchase a large estate of unoccupied land, and in 1852 became the landlords of what has since been commonly known as the South Kensington Estate. For the ultimate use of this large property they proposed to trust to the "voluntary efforts of individuals, corporations, and authorities, to carry out the promotion of the different interests with which they are themselves connected." In their Report for 1856, the Commissioners, alluding to "the question of the site that has been purchased by us," show that, during the intervening years, "the great natural capabilities of the site have been properly developed by means of the construction of important lines of communication and other improvements; and that we are still occupied in taking the remaining steps requisite for perfecting the estate, and rendering it in all respects fit for the great national objects to which it is to be applied." Very shortly afterwards a large area of the Estate was leased to the Royal Horticultural Society. This was laid out as an ornamental garden surrounded by arcades and galleries. The late Prince Consort opened this garden in 1861. His Royal Highness made a speech on the occasion, in the course of which he said, "We may hope that at no distant day this garden will form the inner court of a vast quadrangle of Public Buildings rendered easily accessible by the broad roads which will surround them, Buildings where Science and Art may find space for development, with that light and air which are well-nigh banished from this overgrown metropolis." This was but six months before the death of the Prince. For some years the Prince Consort's superior policy in dealing with the Estate was respected and followed by Her Majesty's Commissioners. The Natural History Museum arose on the land at the south of the Horticultural Gardens. Galleries were built above and at the side of the long eastern and western arcades of the gardens; other galleries were erected between these gardens and

the Natural History Museum. The Government secured a tenure of all these galleries as a temporary home in which the Government has placed the National Science Museum, the Collections of Historic Machinery, the India Museum, and the Collections of Modern Industrial Art. On the far north of the Estate was built the Royal Albert Hall: then followed the Royal College of Music. Later still sprang up the Technological Schools of the City and Guilds of London Institute. But with all this steady realization of the Prince Consort's far-seeing policy the Commissioners were not satisfied. Pleading necessity to find money for defraying the expenses of certain not over-wise experiments undertaken by them, they began to let land on the margins of their Estate for the erection of private dwellings. And the more prominent result of this is the beetling mass of mansions opposite Hyde Park, overshadowing the Albert Hall on one side, and frowning ominously upon the "inner court of the vast quadrangle" of the Estate. Then came the movement for an Imperial Institute. A great slice out of the "inner court" was allocated for this mysterious Institute, which is rapidly asserting its architectural entity. At this point in the development of the Estate, the Commissioners, it would seem, succumbed to the hopeless temptation of washing their hands of further trouble. And, as we have already stated, their present intention is to block up the remaining portion of the "inner court" with private houses and mansions, and thus disencumber themselves of any responsibility for institutions for science and art.

Now, an explanation, which has been offered, of this *volte face* on the part of the Commissioners is this. The subscriptions for the Imperial Institute are insufficient for its endowment. It must be remembered that the Imperial Institute is the outcome of the "Jubilee" loyalty. The possible utility of this Institute has been debated without success. To lay the foundation-stone, and to pay for a staff of subscription-touters and what not, during two years, have exhausted some £25,000 of its capital, which does not reach £300,000. The ingenuity of Lord Thring and Sir Lyon Playfair has, it is said, been accordingly taxed. Their united wits are credited with having proposed the sale to private house builders of the unallotted land as well as of portions of land already occupied by galleries containing the Science Museum and India Museum. The money thus realized, or most of it, is to go into the coffers of the Imperial Institute. Such are the statements made. If they are wrong, they should be contradicted.

Another minor incident which further exemplifies the Commissioners' attitude is the projected removal of the monument raised twenty-five years ago on their estate to commemorate the Exhibition of 1851. This monument is surmounted by a statue of H.R.H. the late Prince Consort. This too is to be swept away to make room for private houses.

WARREN DE LA RUE.

A PROMINENT and representative figure has just disappeared from scientific circles, whose absence will be deeply felt by the many eminent men with whom, for a long time, he had been associated. In the